Data Governance for Development:From Asymmetry to Equitable Stewardship

CSTD Intersessional Panel

Dr Pria Chetty
Executive Director, Research ICT Africa
Member, African Alliance on Access to Data
[e]pchetty@researchictafrica.net

AFRICAN ALLIANCE FOR ACCESS TO DATA

RESEARCH ICT AFRICA

African Data for Development *Governance* Experiences

Data asymmetries arise not only from unequal access to data, but also from differences in countries' capacity to generate, process, govern and derive value from it.

Addressing these inequalities requires:

- ***Policy measures*** that strengthen data ecosystems and local capacity.
- ***Collaborative institutions*** that support accountable and equitable data stewardship.
- ***International cooperation*** that enables shared learning, interoperability and sustainable development.

Five African Experiences

1. **AU Data Policy Framework**
2. **ACHPR Access to Data Guidelines**
3. **Data Justice and Just AI**
4. **African Language Data Ecosystem Governance**
5. **Trusted data exchange for Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI).**

Equitable data governance is about who can generate and use data and who shapes the rules and who benefits from its value.

1. AU Initiative to strengthen African Data Policies: *African Union Data Policy Framework*

Development-oriented data governance?

The 2022 framework recognises data as an enabler of social and economic development, innovation and public services. Raises questions about how the value generated from data can be distributed more equitably.

Domestication at National Level?

National governments translate continental principles into policies, laws, regulations, institutional responsibilities and implementation plans that reflect their legal, social and economic contexts.

Implementation

RIA is working with continental partners through the DataCipation project to support national data policy landscape assessments, policy formulation and capacity-building.

Expert/Government Knowledge Network

DataCipation's Knowledge Exchange pursues insights from African countries moving from policy development to implementation. Culminates in practical *Data Policy Institutional Implementation Toolkit.*

The central question? How can countries move from policy adoption to implementation that strengthens local capacity and enables more equitable participation in the data economy?

Closing the Data Policy Implementation Gaps

Institutional fragmentation: *Responsibilities for data governance may be* ***spread across data protection authorities, ICT ministries, national statistics offices, digital transformation units, sector regulators*** *and other public institutions.*

Uneven capacity: Countries ***differ in the availability of legal expertise, technical skills, data infrastructure and public-sector capacity*** to implement and monitor data policies.

Financing and continuity: Policy development can be supported through time bound projects, but implementation ***requires longer-term budgets, staff, infrastructure and political commitment.***

Participation and legitimacy: Policies need ***input from the people and organisations affected by data governance***, including civil society, researchers, businesses, women and young people.

From policy to practice: Countries need practical ***tools to clarify responsibilities, sequence reforms, measure progress a***nd identify where implementation is falling behind.

What could CSTD contribute?

Support an implementation evidence base: Comparable case studies on institutional models, financing, implementation timelines and monitoring.

Connect policy commitments to development outcomes: Encourage monitoring whether data policies improve public-service delivery, participation, innovation and equitable access to the benefits of data.

Support coordination without imposing uniformity: Countries can identify shared principles and practical approaches while respecting different legal systems and development contexts.

2. Access to Data: An intersecting African human rights and data for development agenda

A regional normative step

In 2024, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights adopted Resolution 620 on promoting and harnessing data access to advance human rights and sustainable development in the digital age.

Public-Interest Access

The Resolution urges states to make data held by public institutions and bodies receiving public funds publicly available by default. It also addresses data held by private actors where an overriding public interest justifies access, subject to applicable human rights standards.

Rights to access and protection

The debate is not simply a choice between right to access and the right to privacy. Question is: how to facilitate economic and social value while protecting personal data and other rights.

Draft Guidelines to Resolution 620

In 2026, the Commission published draft African Guidelines on promoting and harnessing data access for human rights and sustainable development for consultation.

Central opportunity? Developing a stronger basis for treating data access as a human rights, public-interest and development issue.

Closing the Access to Data Guidelines Implementation Gaps

Access to privately held data: Valuable data may be controlled by large digital platforms and other private entities. Public-interest researchers and institutions may lack the bargaining power or resources to obtain it.

Unclear routes to access: Researchers and public-interest organisations may not know which institution to approach, what legal basis applies,or how to challenge an unjustified refusal.

Competing interests: Data access arrangements need to address privacy, security, confidentiality, intellectual property, commercial interests and risks of harm.

Institutional readiness: Access rules need capable institutions, clear procedures, secure data environments and staff who can assess requests and manage risks.

Enabling Data Value Chain: Formal access does not guarantee that institutions have the technical skills, computing resources, funding or expertise to deliver data value. Access to incomplete, biased or poorly documented data can reproduce inequalities rather than address them.

What could CSTD contribute?

Multi stakeholder dialogue between governments, researchers, private data holders and human rights institutions.

Support international cooperation on access to data relevant to cross-border public-interest research.

Connect data access policy to capacity-building so that countries can use data, not merely secure formal access to it.

3. Data Justice and Just AI

AI depends on data across a lifecycle: *Data must be generated or collected, documented, accessed, processed, used to train or evaluate systems and reused over time. Governance decisions at each stage shape the outcomes.*

Data availability is not the same as data justice: *More data can support innovation, but the public-interest question is also whose data are collected, whose knowledge is represented, who can access the data and who benefits from AI applications.*

Fragmented governance creates gaps: *Data protection, data access, AI policy, sector regulation and public-sector data governance may be developed separately. This can leave unclear responsibilities, inconsistent safeguards or limited attention to public value.*

Rights and development should be considered together: *A just approach should address privacy, non-discrimination, transparency and accountability while enabling legitimate public-interest uses of data.*

Context matters: *African countries differ in language resources, infrastructure, regulatory capacity, institutional arrangements and development priorities. Governance models need to respond to those conditions rather than assume that the same technical or regulatory solution will work everywhere.*

Central premise? AI systems inherit the opportunities and inequalities of the data ecosystems in which they are developed and deployed. AI governance therefore cannot be separated from data governance.

From justice principles to practice

The challenge is to connect data rights, public-interest data use, AI oversight and institutional accountability across the data lifecycle.

Assess Material Conditions for Data Value for All: *Connectivity, Hardware, Literacy, Skills, Energy, Safety?*

Equity & Bias Mitigation: *Moving past surface-level statistical fairness to address systemic racial, gender, and socioeconomic biases baked into large datasets and generative models.*

Identity & Contextual Knowledge: *Centering local epistemologies, embodied data, and diverse human experiences rather than imposing monolithic, technocratic standards. Inclusive understanding and coding of standards for value of data for human flourishing, societal, and planetary well-being.*

Community Co-Design: *Recognition for collective data rights in practices means impacted communities defining what data is collected, how it is labeled, and shared, who benefits and whether an AI system should have access.*

What could CSTD contribute?

Advance integrated policy approaches: Bring data governance, AI policy, digital infrastructure and development institutions into the same conversation.

Share practical institutional models: Compare and share approaches to regulatory coordination, impact assessment, oversight and accountability.

Mainstream identity and context for data governance standards: Data value definition must be localised.

4. African language data: *Whose knowledge is represented?*

Underrepresentation in AI: *Many African languages remain under-resourced in AI because there is insufficient digitised, accessible and usable language data to support robust language technologies.*

A data infrastructure problem: *The challenge is not simply the absence of text. Language resources may exist in books, community knowledge, broadcast recordings, archives or research collections but remain undigitised, poorly stored or difficult to access.*

A development problem: *Language barriers can affect access to public information, education, digital services and participation in online spaces. Language data therefore has implications for inclusion and the ability to benefit from digital transformation.*

An opportunity for African innovation: *Community led documentation, research collaboration, open-source tools and language-technology initiatives can expand the availability of African-language resources.*

CSTD Contribution: Equitable Stewardship

Representation: Which languages and communities are present in the datasets?

Access: Who can access and use the datasets and under what conditions?

Control: Who decides how language resources are collected, stored, licensed and reused?

Benefits: How do language communities and local researchers benefit from the systems built using their linguistic resources?

Data asymmetry is also representational. We need sustainable, accessible and responsible language-data ecosystems.

Source:https://www.cigionline.org/publications/ai-and-language-data-flaring-in-africa-addressing-the-low-resource-challenge/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

5. Trusted Data Exchange for DPI: Enabling data value

Fragmented systems: *Public institutions may use different databases, software, standards and procedures, making it difficult to exchange or interpret data consistently.*

Legal authority: *Institutions need to know what information they may share, for which purposes, with whom and under what legal authority.*

Trust and accountability: *Data holders need confidence that information will be used appropriately, secured and handled in accordance with agreed responsibilities.*

Uneven technical capacity: *Institutions may lack the infrastructure, staff and expertise required to implement secure and reliable exchange.*

Unequal bargaining power: *Dependence on external technology providers or proprietary systems can affect public institutions' ability to maintain, adapt or govern their data infrastructure.*

What could CSTD contribute?

Promote practical interoperability dialogue: Bring together technical experts, regulators, governments and development institutions to address legal, organisational and technical barriers.

Support peer learning: Enable countries to share lessons on governance models that work in contexts with different resources and institutional capacities.

Digital public infrastructure depends on data moving between systems and institutions but the data exchanged is only valuable when it is reliable, legally authorised, secure and accountability is clear.

In Closing

- Africa ***is progressing*** against continental and regional policy initiatives for data for development.
- A primary data policy ***implementation challenge is institutional capacity***.
- Solving data asymmetry has a critical ***dependency on access to data and infrastructure of private bodies***.
- ***Integrated data governance matters*** “AI and data governance” “data, people, planet”.
- Working models for Interoperability are key.
- We must solve for meaningful access and beneficiation frameworks.
- Legitimacy of data governance ***must measure extent to which local language, culture and identity are preserved***.



This work is made possible by










RESEARCH
ICT AFRICA
www.researchictafrica.net